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C O N F I D E N T I A L LA PAZ 002571

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: CARDENAS/OTHERS POSITION THEMSELVES TO BE
BOLIVIA'S NEXT PRESIDENT

REF: LA PAZ 2393

Classified By: EcoPol Chief Mike Hammer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Former Vice-President Victor Hugo Cardenas announced he will run in the December 6, 2009 presidential election. Cardenas is rallying the opposition against the government's proposed constitution, which he called "exclusionary, incomplete, illegal, and self-contradictory." The draft constitution will be subject to a national referendum on January 25, 2009. To defeat the referendum, Cardenas proposes the formation of a new "citizens movement" that turns away from the established political parties (all of which have high negative ratings) and focuses on urban youth, particularly in the burgeoning cities of La Paz and El Alto. While Cardenas is publicly positive about defeating the draft constitution, in private he admits it may not be possible. If elections do go forward, there is no guarantee Cardenas will be the standard bearer for a united opposition, as several other candidates and political parties are preparing to enter the political fray, including former President Carlos Mesa. End summary.

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Cardenas Declares for President; Rips Draft Constitution
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¶2. (SBU) Former Vice-President Victor Hugo Cardenas declared his candidacy for the Presidency on December 5. Elections are scheduled on December 6, 2009, assuming passage of a January 25 referendum on the proposed constitution. On December 4, Cardenas gave a speech on the draft constitution, the January 25 referendum, and prospects for Bolivian political change. Cardenas began by reviewing the "exclusionary, incomplete, illegal, and self-contradictory" draft constitution. He commented that by focusing on "plurinationalism" and the "original indigenous" to the exclusion of other Bolivians, the constitution was endorsing a concept of citizenship based on ethnicity that would "break the republic." He contrasted it with the South African Constitution, which he said "recognizes only citizens, not races," adding that Bolivian President Evo Morales "is not Nelson Mandela." Last, he said the "rule of law does not exist now in Bolivia," and that the government was "not creating spaces to solve problems" via its confrontational

style.

¶3. (C) He mentioned several other criticisms with the draft constitution:

-- Lack of business/property certainty will lead to a paralyzed economy, capital flight, and "a coming economic crisis few of us can imagine."

-- State-based capitalism as a model will not work because it is too complex and the government too inefficient.

-- The constitution does not respect the concept of balance of powers, instead tilting heavily in favor of the executive branch.

-- People will use the constitution to mean what they want it to mean, specifically referring to lynchings in the name of "community justice." (Note: The draft constitution specifically states that capital punishment is not allowed, but the current constitution's ban on capital punishment has not prevented deaths due to mob justice. End note.)

-- Other countries have implemented forms of indigenous justice before, but they always clearly articulated the manner in which local justice and ordinary justice would interact. In Bolivia it is unclear and the ability to appeal beyond the indigenous justice system is non-existent. (Note: The text of the draft constitution refers to a future "Demarcation Law" that is supposed to resolve the "handshake" issue between the two judicial systems. End note.)

-- Measuring the "social value" of land holdings is a dangerous concept and a large loophole through which politicized land seizures could become common.

¶4. (SBU) Cardenas heavily criticized opposition congressmen for their participation and approval of a compromise constitutional text in an eleventh-hour deal with the government. He said it was "illegal" to create a significantly new version of the constitution without going through the Constituent Assembly process. He also criticized some opposition leaders for continually discussing "how much better" the new draft is than the earlier Oruro draft, saying that such comments ignore that it is simply a bad text.

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January Referendum: Keep Hope Alive
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¶5. (SBU) Cardenas commented on a "common perception" that the upcoming January 25 referendum on the proposed constitution is a "fait accompli," and that the "yes" vote will easily triumph. He mentioned the desire of the ruling Movement Toward Socialism (MAS) party to gain 70 or 80 percent approval levels, then cited surveys showing support for the new constitution is actually much softer, with the "yes" vote leading only 43 to 36 percent. According to Cardenas, when asked directly whether they prefer the current or proposed constitution, respondents were evenly divided, 41 to 41 percent.

¶6. (SBU) Cardenas said the slim lead of the "yes" vote, along with a large bloc of apparently undecided voters, has the MAS worried about the prospects for the "no" campaign. He foresees the MAS resorting to "its usual tactics," including voter fraud. Cardenas believes fraud during the August recall referendum boosted Morales' 67 percent approval result by between five and seven percent. He opined that many voters who voted for Morales as "the first indigenous president" would not be similarly moved by the new constitution.

¶7. (C) Comment: Support for the proposed constitution is softer than the MAS is projecting. However, even if the "yes" vote does not reach 70 percent, the conventional wisdom is the MAS will not allow the January referendum to fail, which

Cardenas concedes privately. Cardenas said the opposition will fight hard to keep the percentages close and use the "no" campaign to create a base for December general elections. When asked what would happen if the opposition cannot agree on a single candidate for president, Cardenas said, "Then it will all be over," recognizing that against a fragmented opposition the MAS would likely win 2/3 of the seats in Congress and be able to change the constitution at will. End Comment.

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Getting to "No" - Starting a Citizen's Movement
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¶8. (SBU) Cardenas said that although "time is short," everyone who opposes the draft constitution should spread the word to friends and contacts. He cited polls showing large numbers of the draft constitution's proponents had not actually read the text. To spread the opposition's "no" message, Cardenas advocated starting webs of communities to educate people on the draft constitution's content. Cardenas said polling numbers showed La Paz Department, with about 32 percent of the total voting population, was key. While El Alto is admittedly the center of La Paz's "si" vote, "there is hope." He pinned his hopes particularly on the youth of El Alto and urban La Paz, who he viewed as uneducated about the past, open to new ideas, and unknowledgable about the draft constitution's content. Cardenas said the Church could be helpful in the new movement, but advocated against involving the opposition political parties, due to their high negatives.

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Cardenas for President?
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¶9. (SBU) Cardenas, himself an Aymara, expressed disgusted admiration for how the MAS had appropriated the theme of "representing the indigenous." He argued that Morales had not campaigned for indigenous rights before 2005, but that the MAS has shrewdly constructed a revisionist past in which Evo has long campaigned to improve the indigenous plight. Cardenas said that although people are hungry for an indigenous leader, they do not "believe in violence and the politics of division" (i.e. of the MAS). Instead, he countered, they want someone who believes in a unified Bolivia and "values pluralism, but under one banner," heavily foreshadowing his declaration to run for president the next day.

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Santa Cruz Backs Cardenas
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¶10. (C) Opposition Strategist Javier Flores told PolOff that Santa Cruz Prefect Ruben Costas and Santa Cruz Civic Committee President Branco Marinkovic told Flores and Cardenas that they would support him as the opposition's compromise candidate for President. Flores said during a December 4 meeting, Costas and Marinkovic said they considered Cardenas a better option than others, such as UN party leader Samuel Doria Medina or Social Alliance's Rene Joaquino, and that they "despised" ex-President Carlos Mesa. Flores said despite recent friction between the two prominent leaders, they "at least agree on this." He said they promised Cardenas they "would not talk to any others" before the January 25 referendum. Costas' and Marinkovic's staff met with Cardenas December 9 in La Paz to try to construct a mutually-agreed upon platform, which would offer "concrete" alternatives to the MAS agenda and a base for the opposition to unite around.

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Cardenas' Altiplano Street Cred
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¶11. (C) Flores said polls are favorable to Cardenas, particularly because of the higher negatives and strictly

regional appeal of many of the alternatives. However, PolOffs noted a particular lack of enthusiasm for Cardenas in his home region around Lake Titicaca, where residents universally criticized him for forgetting his Aymara roots and cozying up to the "white" establishment. They did, however, credit Cardenas for donating to a local school, which one resident commented "is more than (Foreign Minister and Lake native David) Choquehuanca has done for us." Although Cardenas has lost some credibility in the indigenous altiplano region, many there still harbor mild affection for him for breaking the indigenous "glass ceiling" and credit him for refusing ex-President Gonzalo "Goni" Sanchez de Lozada's offer to be his vice-president for a second time in 2002.

¶12. (C) Cardenas remains almost giddy about the prospect of an opposition alliance and said the political dynamic in Bolivia would turn "when Bolivians see the first photo of us all," foreshadowing an upcoming meeting in Santa Cruz for the "no" campaign. Cardenas has told us he is optimistic an opposition alliance is plausible, including Mesa and "everyone" except for PODEMOS leader Jorge Quiroga, whom Cardenas described as "already dead and 10 feet underground." UN leader Samuel Doria Medina tells us he is working on an opposition alliance in close concert with Mesa and many others, with the exception of Quiroga, who Doria Median views as a campaign negative for an opposition alliance. However, Flores told PolOff December 2 that Quiroga would be likely be part of an alliance and that Mesa would not.

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Mesa (and others): Not So Fast
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¶13. (SBU) Former President Carlos Mesa recently indicated in press interviews that he plans to start, or ally with, a political party and present himself as an alternative to President Evo Morales and the MAS. Former members of the National Revolutionary Movement party (MNR) have allied with Mesa and he is widely touted as a viable alternative due to his national-level name recognition. Similarly, former President Jaime Paz Zamora brought together former Leftist Revolutionary Movement (MIR) members to form the PATRIA group (Pact for Employment, Integration, and Autonomy), which media reports is close to the Social Alliance party led by Potosi Mayor Joaquin. As an indigenous leader, Joaquin has also been mentioned as a potential presidential candidate.

¶14. (C) UN Party leader Samuel Doria Medina has proposed a political primary for an opposition alliance in order to unite the various opposition parties in time for the 2009 general elections (reftel). Doria Medina would likely participate as a presidential candidate. The MNR party is still struggling to build an identity not based on the policies of former President Sanchez de Lozada and the PODEMOS party is widely seen as having lost its relevancy (due mostly to its role bolstering Evo in proposing the August recall referendum). PODEMOS has recently divided into five "sub-parties" and carries strong negative ratings nationally.

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Comment
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¶15. (C) While we believe Cardenas could be a key figure in 2009, his run for the presidency remains a long shot. We have excellent relations with Cardenas and his success would bode well for U.S.-Bolivian relations, but he told PolOff that he is "doing this all alone" and "is not getting help from anybody." Many consider Cardenas fatally tainted by his associations with Goni, with whom he served as vice-president, and he may also suffer from an anti-elitist element, despite his ethnic background.

¶16. (C) Just a month ago Cardenas was touting a united opposition with Mesa as an important component. But as it

became apparent that Mesa was trying to distance himself as an independent and posture himself early as the alternative to Morales, the knives came out; now Flores and other Cardenas backers describe Mesa as "Evo light," or even an agent of Morales. If this is any indication of opposition unity, we find it difficult to believe any of the opposition leaders will be able to unite around a single presidential candidate for 2009 (at least one that is not themselves).
End Comment.
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